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General Assembly

Official Records

Disarmament Commission

198th Meeting
Wednesday, 13 March 1996, 10.30 a.m.
New York

Chairman: Mr. Hoffmann . . . . . (Germany)

The meeting was called to order at 10.55 a.m.

Opening of the session

The Chairman: I declare open the resumed organizational session and the 198th plenary meeting of the United Nations Disarmament Commission.

At the outset, I would like to express my sincere thanks to all delegations for electing me Chairman of the Disarmament Commission for 1996. I consider this a great honour for my country and for myself.

Members will recall that the Disarmament Commission convened an organizational meeting on 11 December 1995 to deal with organizational matters related to the 1996 substantive session, including dates and duration, the election of a new Bureau, the appointment of the chairmen of the subsidiary bodies of the Commission and the draft provisional agenda for the substantive session. However, due to the divergence of views on the dates, duration and provisional agenda for the session, the Commission decided to suspend the organizational session for further consultations. As a result of the strenuous efforts made by Member States, I am pleased to convene this meeting with a view to furthering those items.

Mr. Fridegotto (Italy): Let me express, on behalf of the European Union, our appreciation to you, Sir, for today presiding over the organizational session of the Disarmament Commission. I am sure that under your guidance and wise leadership we shall reach a positive outcome.

After the Disarmament Commission's informal consultations on 16 February, the European Union welcomed the constructive approach taken by Ambassador García of Colombia on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement and informed him and other delegations that the Union could agree to holding the session of the Disarmament Commission for two weeks and one day, beginning on 19 or 22 April.

With regard to the unspecified second item on the draft provisional agenda, the European Union supports the inclusion of an item entitled "Principles and guidelines on nuclear-weapon-free zones". The Union is also prepared to accept a third item entitled "Exchange of views on the fourth special session of the General Assembly devoted to disarmament".

We believe that the European Union's position constitutes a substantive contribution in the building of a consensus around this package. We remain flexible and urge all parties to be equally flexible in order to reach an agreement.

The Chairman: Indeed, these are subjects that we will have to discuss.

The provisional agenda for this resumed organizational session, contained in document A/CN.10/L.37 of 5 December 1995, was adopted at our last meeting, on 11 December 1995.

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Election of the Chairman and other officers

The Chairman: The Chairman and a certain number of officers have already been elected, including the Rapporteur, who has kindly been provided by Jordan; two Vice-Chairmen from the Group of Eastern European States — Poland and Ukraine; one from the Group of Western European and Other States — Finland; and one from the Group of Asian States — Pakistan.

However, four more Vice-Chairmen should be elected, from the Group of African States and the Group of Latin American and Caribbean States. I should like to urge those two regional Groups to expedite their nominations of candidates for the vice-chairmanships of the Commission for 1996 so that we can begin our substantive meetings in an orderly fashion.

Draft provisional agenda for the 1996 substantive session of the Disarmament Commission

The Chairman: A provisional agenda has been provided to the Commission by the Secretariat in document A/CN.10/1995/CRP.6/Rev.1, dated 13 March 1996. Account has been taken of various proposals and the relevant resolutions adopted by the General Assembly, particularly resolution 50/72 D on the Disarmament Commission, as reflected in the document I have just mentioned.

At this juncture, I wish to point out that in that document, item 4, entitled "International arms transfers, with particular reference to resolution 46/36 H of 6 December 1991", a substantive agenda item for 1996, is the same as that of the 1995 substantive session and is expected to be concluded by the Commission this year, since it is in its third year under discussion.

As a result of intensive consultations during the past few months among various groups and delegations concerned, it has been agreed that the provisional agenda for the 1996 substantive session should contain the three following items: first, "International arms transfer, with particular reference to resolution 46/36 H of 6 December 1991"; secondly, "[to be added]", which is the same wording that appears in the resolution; and, thirdly, "Exchange of views on the fourth special session of the General Assembly devoted to disarmament".

It is understood that the second substantive item should be related to nuclear issues. The exact title of the item is still the subject of consultations and should be finalized by the end of March so the Commission can take a decision.

Mr. Moradi (Islamic Republic of Iran): We congratulate you, Sir, on your well-deserved election as Chairman of the Disarmament Commission.

With respect to the draft provisional agenda for the 1996 substantive session, we see no reference to a general exchange of views or a general debate. Could you kindly explain this?

The Chairman: This does not mean that we will not have a general debate. It is taken up in the document on the programme of work, which will be distributed. In it, it will be seen that we have, in fact, provided for a plenary meeting with a view to having a general exchange of views. Apparently, this has not been included in the agenda as such because the agenda deals more with substantive items than with procedural matters, whereas the allotment of time is set in the programme of work, and there is a general debate foreseen.

Mr. Liebowitz (United States of America): First of all, let me join other colleagues in congratulating you, Sir, on your well-deserved election as head of this body.

Secondly, on the question of the agenda, as some members may remember, at our last organizational meeting, in December the United States argued in favour of two agenda items, one of which would have been an item dealing with conventional weapons.

After consultations with friends in the Commission and considering the positive approach that many had taken, we agreed that we could accept three items, including one dealing with the possibility of a fourth special session. In line with what the representative of the European Union said, we, too, could agree to a discussion of principles and guidelines on nuclear-weapon-free zones. We hope that some agreement will be able to be reached along these lines soon.

The Chairman: I thank the representatives of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States for their congratulations.

I sincerely hope that we can settle this very soon, but what I described is really the general package on which we can agree.

Mr. García (Colombia) (*interpretation from Spanish*): First of all, we would like to say how pleased we are, Sir, at your assumption of the responsibilities of the chairmanship of this Commission. We are convinced that under your leadership, with your experience and careful handling of negotiations, the Commission's deliberations will produce important results this year.

In addition, I wish to express our appreciation for the submission of the provisional agenda. I must say, on behalf of the countries of the Non-Aligned Movement, that we are pleased to see the progress achieved as a result of the exchange of views with other delegations and groups, including the European Union, the United States and other Members of the Organization. I wish to take this opportunity to stress the excellent climate established in the exchange of views and the progress achieved. I also wish to thank the Ambassador of Mongolia for his enormous efforts during the consultation process.

For the moment, we believe that the agreement on the number of items, the dates, the inclusion in the agenda of an exchange of views on the fourth special session of the General Assembly devoted to disarmament and the achievement of agreement on the second item on our agenda will enable us to reach an agreement allowing us to work successfully in our deliberations within the Disarmament Commission.

The Chairman: We are making progress. If there are no other comments, we can at least agree on this part of our package. Of course, we shall have to work on it.

Organizational matters

The Chairman: We shall now turn to the establishment of subsidiary bodies.

Since the Disarmament Commission has agreed on three substantive agenda items for the 1996 substantive session, it may wish, as in the 1995 substantive session, to continue to have three working groups to deal with these three subjects. It is my understanding that there is general agreement on this point.

This means that we would establish, as is customary, the following subsidiary bodies: first, a Committee of the Whole to deal with items 7 and 8, as well as any other issues concerned, in an informal manner, which will be presided over by the Chairman; secondly, Working Group I, which will deal with item 4, entitled "International arms transfers, with particular reference to resolution 46/36 H of 6 December 1991"; thirdly, Working Group II, which will deal with item 5, the exact title of which will hopefully be finalized by the end of March 1996; and fourthly, Working Group III, which will deal with item 6, entitled "Exchange of views on the fourth special session of the General Assembly devoted to disarmament".

If there is no objection, I shall take it that the Disarmament Commission wishes to establish those subsidiary bodies.

It was so decided.

The Chairman: Next, the Commission has to appoint the respective Chairmen for the three working groups. The question at this stage is who will chair which group and on what item. At this juncture I would like to draw the attention of members of the Commission to the provision in the adopted "Ways and means to enhance the functioning of the Disarmament Commission" that reads:

> "The allocation of the agenda items to the four subsidiary bodies and the appointment of chairmen for these subsidiary bodies should be decided at the organizational session of the Commission, taking into account the principle of equitable geographical distribution." *(A/CN.10/137, sect. 4, para. 1)*

That is the theory. In practice, we are having some difficulty finding chairmen this year. As a matter of fact, just before this meeting a representative of one delegation told me that his delegation was unable to take over the chairmanship of Working Group I, as I had expected it to do. This has something to do with this year's very loaded disarmament agenda, with a great many meetings taking place. We will have to make efforts to find suitable chairmen. I am aware of and I note the interest of different groups in different items. I urge delegates to come forward with proposals for who should lead each working group. I appeal to the Chairmen of the Non-Aligned Movement and of the Mason group to look into the matter very carefully within their groups so that consultations on who should be doing what can soon take place. That would also give the chairmen a chance to prepare themselves for their tasks. I would like to propose that we leave the matter for the time being, with a view to making a decision at a meeting towards the end of this month.

I see no objection.

It was so decided.

The Chairman: We now turn to the matter of the dates and duration of the 1996 substantive session.

As members will recall, at the last plenary meeting of the Disarmament Commission divergent views were expressed on the dates and duration of the 1996 substantive session, although, as occurred in 1990, 1991, 1992, 1993 and 1994, a period of three weeks and one day has been traditional.

Last year, the substantive session of the Disarmament Commission had a duration of only two weeks and one day due to a special event — the 1995 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) Review and Extension Conference. That was an exception.

As a result of consultations over the past months, it has apparently been agreed that the 1996 substantive session of the Disarmament Commission will also have a duration of two weeks and one day. It is clearly understood that such a duration should not set a precedent for the future.

We had considered a number of different time slots, but it appears that the most suitable one would be the period of two weeks and one day starting from 22 April. We have two additional problems there. One is the Islamic holiday on Monday, 29 April, on which we will have no meetings. Members may wish to decide to make up for this by extending the usual duration of the session by one day, either by beginning on Friday, 19 April, or by ending on Tuesday, 7 May. Yesterday evening, we discussed this with a group from the Non-Aligned Movement, the Mason group and the Secretariat; we came to the conclusion that it would be advisable to start on 22 April and to end on 7 May.

Before commenting further, I call upon the Secretary of the Commission to read out a little bad news.

Mr. Lin (Secretary of the Disarmament Commission): I have been contacted by the Assistant Secretary-General for Conference and Support Services of the Department of Administration and Management regarding limitations on document processing. His communication in part reads as follows:

"The Office of Conference and Support Services will no longer process documents on weekends except when a document is required by the Security Council for an urgent meeting to be held on a Saturday or a Sunday. This measure is dictated by the need to reduce substantially the overtime costs involved in this practice, in line with the budget reductions being implemented throughout the Secretariat.

"Therefore, documents will no longer be accepted on Friday for issuance on Monday morning, and the availability of documents for bodies in session should be planned with this consideration in mind. If it is necessary to issue a document on a Monday morning, discussions should be held with Conference Services regarding an appropriate date for submission".

The Chairman: Those are the facts with which we have to live. The consequence of this is the following: if we start our meetings on 22 April we have the first full week at our disposal. The first day of this will, of course, be devoted to plenary meetings, then we will have four days for substantive work in the Working Groups. In the second week, Monday is a holiday, but we again have four days for the Working Groups. Hence, the substantive work of the Commission would be finished on Friday of the second week. Under these constraints, the Secretariat would not be able to process the results of that work for a final report to be adopted on Monday, 6 May. Therefore, there would be no meetings on Monday, 6 May; the Secretariat would prepare the draft report. Then, on Tuesday, 7 May, there would be the usual formal concluding meeting to adopt the draft report.

In very practical terms, this means that delegations involved in negotiations in Geneva on a comprehensive test-ban treaty could leave New York over the weekend and start their negotiations in Geneva on Monday, 6 May: there will be no substantive work here on that day. Only I as Chairman — and whoever wishes to have a weekend in New York and environs — need stay on until Tuesday, 7 May. I want to make it crystal clear that there would be no need for the Geneva crowd to remain in New York, because I do not want to interfere with the comprehensive test-ban treaty work in Geneva: this was a difficulty we had with the timing all along.

To make it clear: all substantive work will take place in the two weeks beginning on 22 April. On Tuesday, 7 May, there will be only a formal meeting to adopt the draft report, which traditionally has been covered by New York delegations.

I should like the Commission if possible to come to an agreement on this now, because for planning purposes it is absolutely necessary for the Secretariat to know what to do and when.

Are there any comments?

Mr. Liebowitz (United States of America): While this looks like it is not a bad idea, I would like to check with the people in our delegation who are involved in this and make sure it is okay. I could confirm this later with the Chair, if that is all right. I do not know what the procedural impact of this would be, and I would want to be able to come back to this in the event that the formal United States representative at the session should find that there is a problem with the dates.

The Chairman: My problem is a very practical one. The Secretariat wanted to have this decision two weeks ago, but I could not come to New York, so they were kind enough to give me some more leeway, and Mr. Lin is sitting here at my side instead of enjoying his vacation. The Secretariat wants to have some security in its planning.

I hope we shall be having another organizational meeting at the end of March, when the rest of the matters before us have been settled. This will hopefully be chaired by a Vice-Chairman. We could take this up again at that time.

Let us do it this way: if there is no strong objection, I should like to let the Secretariat know that it should plan for the period 22 April to 7 May. If need be, we will come back to this formally at our next organizational meeting. I am sure that if the United States has a problem, it will let us know beforehand so that everyone can be prepared.

Mr. Abdel Aziz (Egypt): I have no problem with your proposal. I simply wish to confirm my impression that we are going to meet for only two weeks instead of two weeks and one day, as we will not meet on 29 April or on 6 May. I have no objection, but I should like to stress that this should not be considered as a precedent in our work. We understand the United Nations financial crisis; we have received this kind of information in other bodies and other forums. We have no problem with this, but we do not think that this should set a precedent in the work of the United Nations Disarmament Commission.

The Chairman: That is my understanding exactly. I stated earlier that I do not see this as a precedent.

If there is no objection, I shall take it that the Committee accepts the proposal.

It was so decided.

Programme of work

The Chairman: In order to facilitate the work of the next substantive session of the Commission, the Secretariat has prepared a draft general programme of work, which has been distributed to members, as contained in document A/CN.10/1995/CRP.1. This programme is rather indicative and subject to change if necessary. In this regard, the Bureau will decide the exact weekly programme in due course at the session itself. I fully understand the concern of some delegations regarding the problem of simultaneous meetings. However, since this session is rather short, the simultaneous meetings are a matter of necessity. Furthermore, due to the budget reductions, no documents can be processed during the weekend, as we said earlier. As a consequence, we will not meet on 6 May.

In addition, members will have the evenings free, as there will be no night sessions. This will be good for New York theatre.

As I said earlier, this is really an indicative programme, similar to that of previous years, and I promise members that we will be flexible. We will play it by ear if there is a need to shift meetings.

Mr. Rivero Rosario (Cuba) (*interpretation from Spanish*): At the proper time we shall formally convey our congratulations to you, Mr. Chairman. We are pleased to see you at the helm, and we regret that we will not have any night meetings, particularly when we recall your successful work in that difficult Working Group on regional approaches. We are therefore certain that the Commission will be equally successful this year under your chairmanship.

My delegation is pleased that the difficult process of consultations in which we have been engaged, including in the First Committee meetings held during the last session of the General Assembly on questions relating to

the Commission, is producing some results. I believe that this experience shows that with persistence, we will be able to finalize matters on which agreement is still pending.

Concerning the programme of work, my delegation agrees with the starting date suggested by the Chairman. We regret that this year once again — and once again without setting a precedent, as occurred in 1995 — the work of our Commission will be of shorter duration. However, we acknowledge that circumstances impose this upon us. We hope that this matter will be resolved in 1997 and thereafter.

I should like to refer at this time to two issues related to the programme of work. Over the years, we have been reducing the length of the debate, and last year — the first time this happened, and without setting a precedent — we held extensive discussions on its duration. If I remember correctly, I believe we reached a satisfactory agreement: that we would shorten the debate — not to two meetings, however, but to three. As a result, as we know, first of all we approve the programme of work — after having exchanged greetings, of course — and exchange views on elected officials and so on, which will leave hardly any time. Last year's agreement — which, I insist, set no precedent — was to hold three plenary meetings. My delegation recalls that we even had the flexibility, should the list of speakers become overlong, to take a little time from the next meeting in order to finish our debate.

We note that now only part of the morning and the afternoon are set aside for the exchange of views. My delegation believes that, as we did last year — and I insist once again that no precedent was set — we should set aside three meetings for the general exchange of views. If there are not enough speakers, we can cut back to two meetings; if there are enough, then we can hold three meetings. That is the first point I wanted to make.

Secondly, we are all aware of the efforts that have been made throughout the consultations, particularly by the Secretariat, with respect to the unfortunate situation of our Commission. The Commission has traditionally had a specific meeting date, which changed last year due to well-known circumstances, but this year it faces problems — even bigger problems, perhaps — with respect to the Secretariat's facilities.

We know that the second team of interpreters has been finalized, fortunately, and that a conference room has become available. However, my delegation believes that the plenary meeting room is too large for meetings of the working groups; it is not at all appropriate. This is nothing new; we are all aware of it. Furthermore, I think the question of the plenary meeting room should be marked with an asterisk, so to speak. We will entrust this matter to the Secretariat, confident that, with its effective management and influence, it will eventually find us a suitable room.

The Chairman: As I said earlier, we will be as flexible as necessary, and this applies to the plenary meetings as well. If there are more speakers than we can accommodate at the end of the morning and in the afternoon of 22 April, then we will surely hold another plenary meeting on the morning of Tuesday, 23 April. There is no question about that, and this will be decided by the Bureau as we go along.

I note in this context that on Fridays we have traditionally held short plenaries of the Committee of the Whole just to confirm where we stand. The Secretariat has scheduled that meeting for Tuesday, April 30. There we are flexible.

Of course, there will be none of the intimate charm of the General Assembly Hall, especially for the working meetings, but the fact remains that we have no other room in this inn, and we will therefore have to go on living with this situation. I think that we can still do it, because we will also have at our disposal smaller rooms such as Rooms 5, 6 or 7, so I imagine that the Chairman and the Chairmen of the Working Groups will agree amongst themselves which meetings should be held in Room 4 and which can be moved to one of the smaller rooms in a more negotiation-like atmosphere, without nameplates but with full interpretation. Therefore I suppose that we shall have enough room and enough flexibility again to manage this, and I am fully confident that the Secretariat will help us solve this problem.

Mr. Mesdoua (Algeria) (*interpretation from French*): Like previous speakers, Mr. Chairman, I should like to congratulate you on your well-deserved election. I should like to assure both you and the Bureau of my delegation's full cooperation

On the whole, on the matter of the dates and duration of the session, my delegation has no major objections and accepts the proposals you have put to this meeting. I should, however, point out that precedents have a tendency to become traditions within the Disarmament Commission, and, although my delegation does understand the difficult situation the Organization is

going through, I do nevertheless regret that the restrictions are having repercussions for our delegations.

In this connection, the fact that formal and informal meetings of the various groups are to overlap will make it impossible for us to participate fully in the work of those groups.

The Chairman: I recognize this difficulty, but it could very well be the case that it will not really prove necessary for there to be parallel meetings. We will see what we can do as we go along, and try to alleviate this difficulty somewhat, particularly for the smaller delegations.

Mr. Sulaiman (Syria) (*interpretation from Arabic*): I congratulate you, Mr. Chairman, on your election as Chairman of the Commission, and assure you of our full cooperation and support.

I speak only to reaffirm the importance of interpretation for our meetings, since interpretation provides the only way that we can contribute fully to the work of the Commission. I know you have already referred briefly to that issue, but I should like further clarification.

The Chairman: I have been assured that we have two teams of interpreters so that every meeting will in fact be provided with full interpretation, both morning and afternoon, double track, so delegations should be fully satisfied that the interpretation issue is being taken care of.

At this juncture, I should like to express my special thanks to my Mongolian colleague Mr. Erdenechuluun, who has really helped me a lot: I have the disadvantage of not living here in New York, and he has been very kind in helping me out by prolonging somewhat his endeavours as Chairman last year.

I should also express my special thanks to Ambassador García, who made major efforts to come to grips with all our issues, and to all the members of the other delegations who, in the spirit of compromise and of working together, have brought us to where we are now, where we can see that we can have hope and prospects for a successful substantive session this year.

In my view, this is really needed for the Disarmament Commission's future: that we can show that useful work is being done. I therefore hope sincerely that we can come to a nuclear item that is agreeable by everyone and that holds out hope of a substantive result, for otherwise we really do not need it: we have had enough failures in this respect. As members are aware, I believe in the Disarmament Commission and I want this operation to succeed; and if we work together, we can make it a success.

As I have said, we need to have another meeting of this kind to finalize those matters that I have indicated are still pending: one substantive agenda item; the appointment of the Chairmen of the Working Groups and of such Vice-Chairmen as have not yet been appointed; and, if necessary, the question of dates for the session.

There being no further speakers, I shall conclude this item on our agenda.

I thank you all for attending this meeting.

The meeting rose at 11.50 a.m.